

Communiversality

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A Rural Community's Response to its Changing Demography: Welcome to Worthington

Prepared in partnership with
The City of Worthington, MN

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June 2011

CMV Report # 034

*This report is available on the CURA website:
<http://www.cura.umn.edu/publications/search>*

June 2011

Communiversality is coordinated and funded by the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) at the University of Minnesota.

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Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgement goes to the community of Worthington, the Karen community of Worthington, the Karen community of Minnesota, Lifetrack Resources, Alan Oberloh, Angie Peralta, Chris Van Dyne, Doug Roth, Jenny Andersen Martinez, Jerry Fiola, Jonah Beckermann, Josh Oberloh, Lee Cumiskey, Luis Catus, Maung Htun Naing, Michael Cumiskey, Sandaw Aye, Paul Larson, Sharon Johnson, Shelley Glaser, Sherry Hintgen, Gerald Fry, Jeff Corn, Julio Cabrera, Kris Nelson, Ama Sabah, Gus Avenido, Khaeng Sinakhone, and Mohamed Ahmed for their support.

Executive Summary

Worthington, Minnesota, has provided employment for Karen refugees from Burma since 2007 due to the availability of positions where English language was not a prerequisite for employment. Many of the refugees were assisted in resettlement by non-profit refugee employment service agencies located in the Twin Cities metropolitan area of Minneapolis and St. Paul. In 2010, Karen refugees were interviewed to determine their satisfaction with the move to Worthington (Stone, 2010). As the refugees in Worthington become more settled, other rural communities are being examined for the possibility of available employment. Through interviews with community leaders this study investigates the factors in Worthington that led to the overall success of the relocation.



Figure 1: Winter in Worthington, (Stone,2011)

Keywords: Worthington, refugees, Karen, Burma, Myanmar, mutual adaptation

Executive Summary Translated into Karen

စးထီၣ်ဖဲန့ၣ် ၂၀၀၇ ကညီဘၣ်ကီဘၣ်ခဲဖိလၢဟဲလၢကီၢ်ပယီၤလၢလဲယုဖံးယုမၤတၢ်လၢဝံၣ် Worthington ပူၤ နီၣ်ဂံၢ်အိၣ်ဝဲဒီးန့ၣ်လီၤ. တၢ်မၤလၢ ကညီပုၤဘၣ်ကီဘၣ်ခဲဖိ မၤသ့ၣ်တဖၣ်န့ၣ် တလိၣ်ကတိၤကီၤလၢဝါကျိၣ် ဘၣ်. ပုၤဘၣ်ကီဘၣ်ခဲဖိသ့ၣ်တဖၣ်န့ၣ် ဒ်သီးကနီၣ်ဝဲတၢ်မၤတဖၣ်အဂီၢ် ဘၣ်တၢ်ဟံးစုန့ၣ်ကျဲ မၤစၢၤအီၤလၢကရၢ သဘျုလၢ အယုန့ၣ် ပုၤဘၣ်ကီဘၣ်ခဲဖိတဖၣ် အတၢ်မၤဝဲၤကျိၤ လၢဆီလီၤသးဖဲ ဝံၣ်ခံၣ်ျၢၣ် St. Paul ဒီး Minneapolis လၢ Twin cities metropolitan ဟီၣ်ကဝီၤပူၤန့ၣ်လီၤ.

ဖဲန့ၣ်၂၀၁၀ ကညီဘၣ်ကီဘၣ်ခဲဖိတဖၣ် ဘၣ်တၢ်ထံၣ်လိာ်သံကွၢ်သံဒီးမဲၣ်သကိးမဲၣ် (Interview) ဘၣ်ယးဒီးအ ဝဲသ့ၣ်အတၢ်လဲၤဆီလီၤသး သးလီၤသးကျဲလၢဝံၣ် Worthington ပူၤန့ၣ် မ့ၢ်အဝဲသ့ၣ် အတၢ်သ့ၣ်မံးမုၢ်အိၣ်ဝဲ န့ၣ်ထဲလဲၣ်အဝံၣ်သ့ၣ်တဖၣ်န့ၣ်လီၤ. ဝံၣ်Worthington ပူၤ ပုၤဘၣ်ကီဘၣ်ခဲဖိ အတၢ်ဆီလီၤသး အနီၣ်ဂံၢ်အါထီၣ် ဒီး တၢ်ယုဖံးယုမၤအလီၢ်အကျဲလၢပုၤတဝါပူၤတဖၣ်စ့ၢ်ကိး ခွဲးယာ်အိၣ်ထီၣ်န့ၣ်လီၤ.

ခီဖျိလၢတၢ်ထံၣ်လိာ်သံကွၢ်သံဒီးဒီးပုၤတဝါခိၣ်န့ၣ်တဖၣ်အယိန့ၣ် တၢ်မၤလိဝဲအံၤ ယုထံၣ်သ့ၣ်ညါန့ၣ်ဝဲန့ၣ် တၢ်ဝံၣ် တၢ်ကျိၤသ့ၣ်တဖၣ်လၢဝံၣ် Worthington ပူၤအံၤန့ၣ် ဟံးစုန့ၣ်ကျဲဝဲတၢ်လဲၤထီၣ်လဲၤထီလၢတၢ်သ့ၣ်ထီၣ်ဆီလီၤ သးအဂီၢ်န့ၣ်လီၤ.

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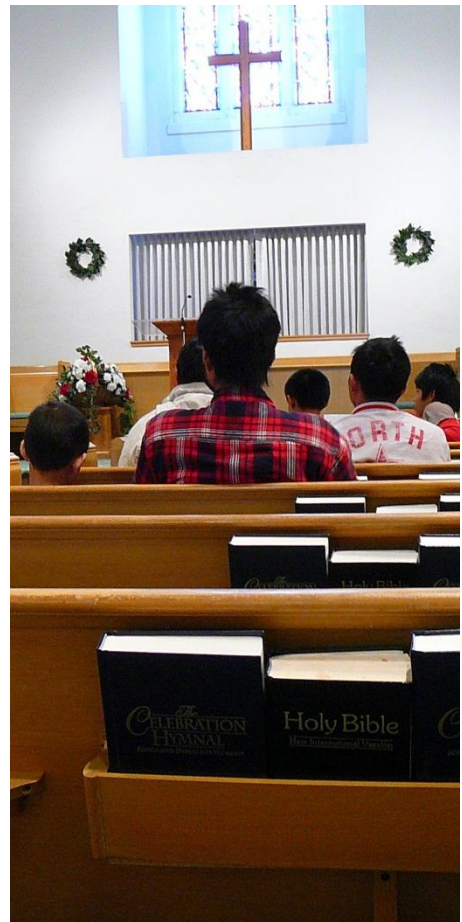


Figure 2: Karen Worship Service, (Stone, 2011)

A Rural Community's Response to its Changing Demography:
Welcome to Worthington

I made up my mind that I wanted to love these people.
--Worthington Faith Community Leader

*When we toured the plant everybody smiled. It was really unbelievable—
everybody smiled and welcome-- stranger, you know. We toured the plant and
out in the community-- stranger, you know, greeted you “hi, where are you from”
sort of like that and it's kind of make us welcome.*
---man from Burma speaking about his impression of Worthington

Study Purpose

This study is a companion study to: *An Evaluation of Lifetrack Services to Karen in a Second Wave of Migration to Worthington, Minnesota: Nine Rays of Light Reach the Star of the North*,¹ a study of the secondary migration of Karen people from St. Paul to Worthington, Minnesota, in which Karen refugees in Worthington reported that their resettlement to Worthington was successful. Through interviews with community leaders in Worthington, this study attempts to determine what factors led to the resettlement success and to learn what local individuals did to help the community of Worthington adapt to the Karen refugees. Refugees need jobs that do not require English and that also pay a living wage. New communities are being evaluated for their capacity to provide a welcoming environment for refugees. The purpose of this study is to determine key factors in communities that lead to resettlement success.

¹ Stone, B., *An Evaluation of Lifetrack Services to Karen in a Second Wave of Migration to Worthington, Minnesota: Nine Rays of Light Reach the Star of the North*¹. Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) Communiversity, University of Minnesota, September, 2010, <http://www.lifetrackresources.org/news/research/evaluation-lifetrack-services-karen-second-wave-migration-worthington-minnesota>

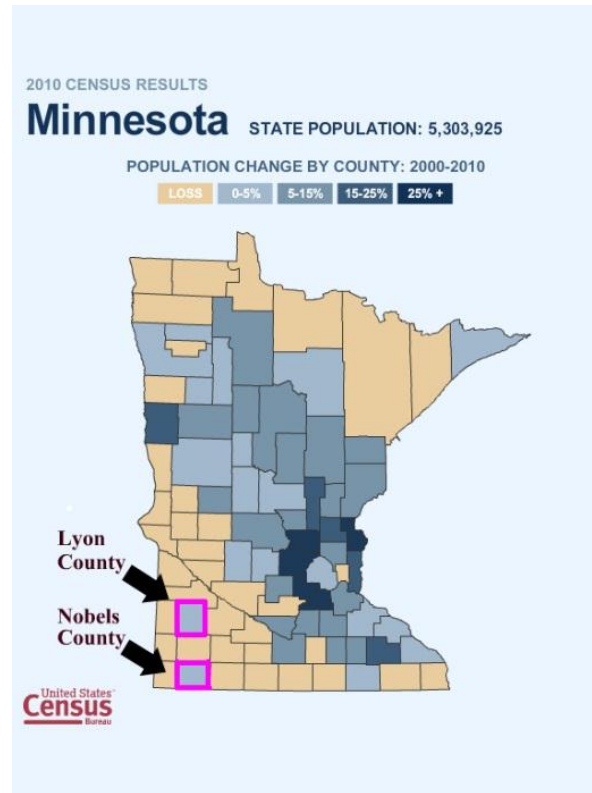


Figure 3 <http://www.demography.state.mn.us/census2010widgetAbout.html>

Worthington, Minnesota

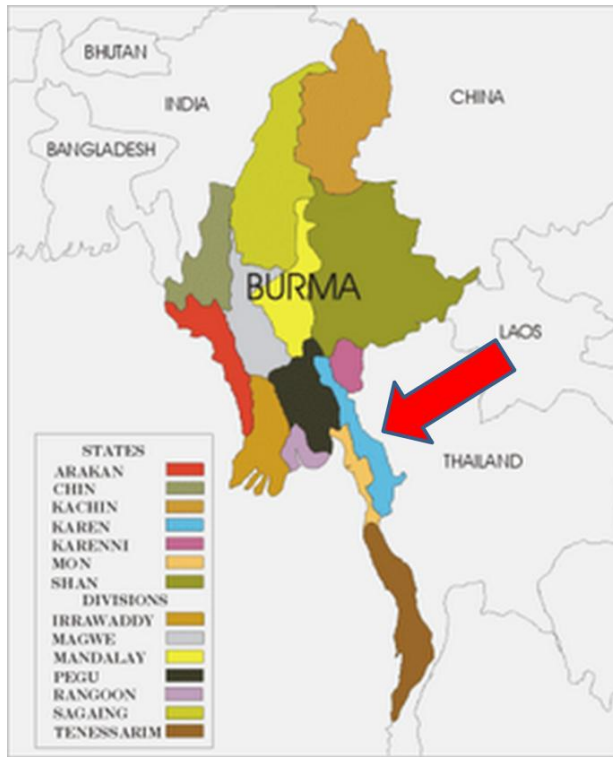
Worthington, Minnesota, in Nobles County has a population of 12,764 people according to a recent release from the 2010 census, an increase of 13% since the 2000 census. This is at a time when many rural cities around Worthington are seeing a decline in population.

“That is positive news for the community,” Marshall Mayor Bob Byrnes [of Marshall, Minnesota] said this week. “And the implications are far-reaching,” he said. “Lyon and Nobles County really stick out as the only two counties in the entire southwest Minnesota region reporting population growth,” Byrnes said. “A lot of that growth appears to be tied to the cities of Marshall and Worthington” (Gau, 2011).

Worthington, Minnesota (U.S. Census Data)	2000	2010	% Increase
Total Population	11,283	12,764	13%
Asian Population	797	1004	26%

Map of Karen State

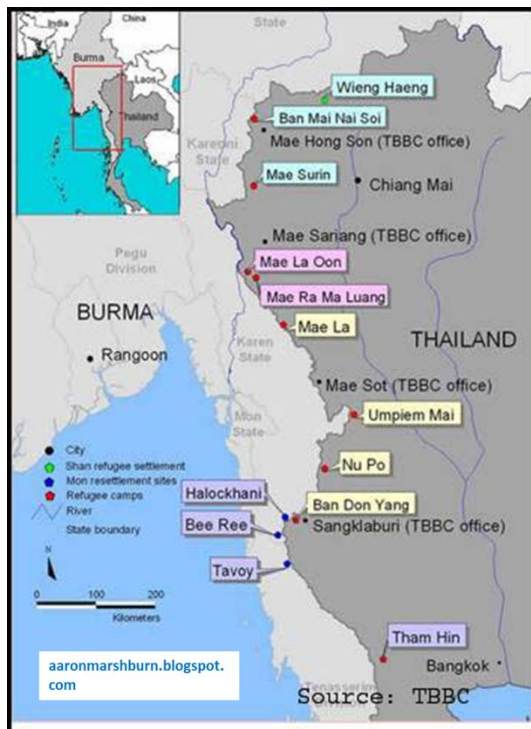
Map of Burma (Karen state highlighted in blue)



<http://burmaandfreedom.blogspot.com/2008/03/free-burma.html>



<http://www.khrg.org/maps/2006maps/Karen2006.jpg>



Map of Karen refugee camps located in Thailand

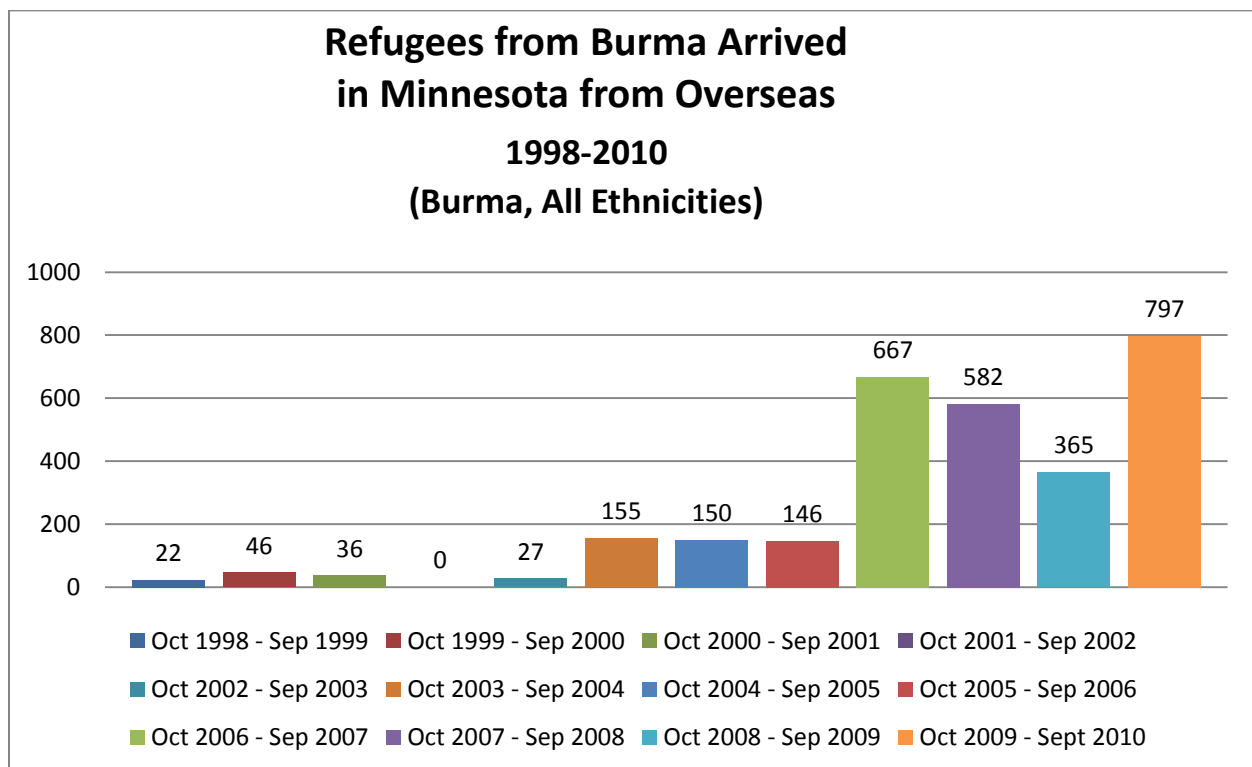
Figure 4 Maps of Karen State

Karen refugees have been arriving in Minnesota in increasing numbers since 2006. Not finding stable employment in the Twin Cities, mostly due to the inability to speak English and the state of the economy, Karen refugees began to settle in Worthington. Unofficial estimates of the Karen population in Worthington are currently between 400 and 500 people, although exact population numbers are difficult to determine.

The Karen People

The Karen people are from the mountainous areas of Burma and Thailand.² According to the Minnesota Department of Human Services, 797 refugees from Burma arrived in

Table 1 Compiled from MN Dept of Human Services data



² See companion study for more information on the Karen and on Worthington

Minnesota last year (FY2009). Thirty-eight percent of all new refugee arrivals are from Burma, the highest percent of all newly arriving refugee groups (MN DHS, 2010). Most of the 2,993 Karen refugees who have arrived in Minnesota (mostly via Thai refugee camps) since October 1998 (MN DHS, 2010), have settled primarily in St. Paul, Minnesota. Unknown numbers of people from Burma have come to Minnesota following primary resettlement in other states. St. Paul, Minnesota, and especially the 55117 zip code area, now has the largest Karen community outside of Asia (KOM, 2010).

Methodology and Methods

This study is based on interviews with community leaders in government, business, housing, education and faith communities in Worthington, Minnesota, in 2011. Theoretical frameworks of mutual adaptation (Berry, 1997) and social contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 2008) were utilized with mixed methods (Creswell, 2009; DeJaeghere & Fry, 2003), including ethnographically and phenomenologically inspired case studies through in depth interviews, triangulation, document review and member checking. Targeted and network sampling were used.

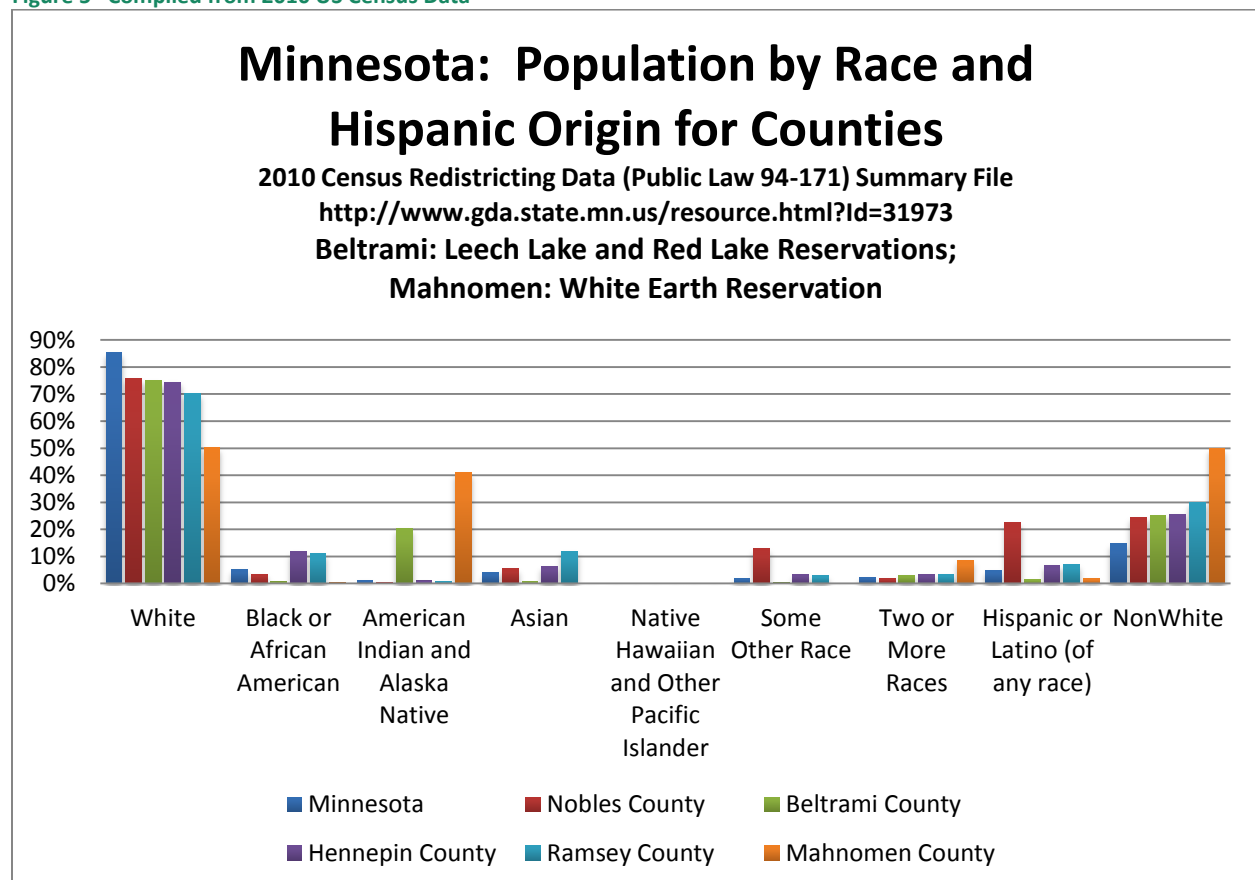
Findings

Several characteristics were identified by community leaders as being significant to resettlement success for the Karen: Worthington's history of diversity, Worthington's existing infrastructure, Worthington's welcoming environment, the modeling of inclusive behavior by community leaders, extraordinary support and encouragement, the characteristics of the Karen people themselves, and an interest in or commitment to mutual learning or mutual adaptation.

History of Diversity

A history of diversity was reported by Worthington leaders as a key success factor in the resettlement of Karen refugees in Worthington. As early as the 1960s industry in Worthington attracted African-American families from as far away as Chicago, the Twin Cities, and Sioux City to work and settle. In the 1990s, Vietnamese and Laotians came to work after the Vietnam War. In the late 1990s, the Hispanic population began to arrive. In 2007, the first Karen

Figure 5 Compiled from 2010 US Census Data



refugees began to arrive from St. Paul. By 2010 Worthington was the home to third-generation Asians, many different refugee groups, Spanish speaking people, and people of European and African ancestry, making Worthington a community with people from 36 countries who speak 56 different languages. According to 2010 U.S. Census data, Nobles County is fifth out of

Minnesota's 87 counties in terms of percentage of diversity, following Hennepin County (Minneapolis) and Ramsey County (St. Paul), and two counties containing the Leech Lake, Red Lake, and White Earth Reservations.

Existing Infrastructure

Worthington community leaders reported that the history of diversity led to an infrastructure already existing in Worthington at the time the Karen began arriving. Though no Karen refugees had lived in Worthington prior to 2007, other non-English speaking groups had settled in Nobles County previously. An 82 year-old gentleman was interviewed at the Worthington faith community where he had been a member for 73 years. He told the story of how the church was formerly a Swedish church. His grandfather had come from Sweden and homesteaded land near the existing church site, in the 1870s. The first church services were held in their sod house. Originally, all the services were conducted in Swedish, but by the 1940s the service was in English with only the adult Sunday school classes offered in Swedish. Now the adult Sunday school classes are offered in Karen and are combined with English instruction. This story illustrates how new communities adapted to Worthington by learning English. The mother of the interviewee was from Sweden. Perhaps observing his mother's own process of adapting to life in Worthington made him more sympathetic to other newcomers on their path to adaptation. The same gentleman said that one Sunday a Karen couple came and asked to talk to the pastor:

They asked "would it be all right if we came out and worshiped with you." "Why sure of course it would." The next Sunday I counted-- there were 49 people. The next Sunday, there were 80 and I have never seen less than 80 to 140.

When asked what the congregation thought about this, he said that some of the English-speaking congregation members did not accept the Karen and had stopped coming, but those were very few. He attributed this to the very different worship styles of the Karen, who show respect in ways different from the English speaking congregation members.

It's very hard [to get used to that] but you can't help but love the people.... [The Karen] are very loving, kind, generous people. They don't have money but they'll do anything-- ... if you need some kind of help, they'll be there. Every week I get to know them better and better and it's a good friendship.

Infrastructure existed in the school system, too. According to one interviewee at School District 518:

We actually have had an established bilingual outreach program in the community since 1992 or 1993. We did not have somebody who spoke Karen or Burmese but over the years we've had bilingual-bicultural outreach workers for the Latino community plus also for the East African and Southeast Asian, mainly ... Lao. We lost the Lao position and the East African position probably six or seven years ago. So for the last four or five years it's been mostly a full-time Latino Spanish speaker, but we had the infrastructure there to have an outreach program so when the Karen first started moving into the community we were able to arrange for some special funding from the Office of Refugee Services for Karen and Burmese outreach workers.

Other infrastructure that was modified to support the Karen were drivers education classes (both classroom instruction and behind the wheel), a car care program, a series of classes on household management, the Citizens Academy (a program offered by the police explaining how the police, court and justice systems work), home buying classes, adult and children English as a Second Language classes, the translation of written documents and forms into Karen, and transportation to these programs (since there is no public transportation system in Worthington). In addition to District 518, other organizations that supported the Karen were the Nobles County Integration Collaborative Integration Collaborative (NCIC), South Western Minnesota Opportunity Council, and the Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota.

Welcoming Environment

The Karen reported that they were welcomed in the community. One such event was a welcome event that introduced the Karen to Worthington and Worthington to the Karen. The event was held at the Nobles County Integration Collaborative on Saturday, April 5, 2008, in conjunction with community businesses, the city of Worthington, Local Union 1161-United Food and Commercial Worker, District 518 Schools, Minnesota West Community and Technical College, the Worthington Area Chamber of Commerce, the Lao Buddhist Temple, YMCA, Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership, Worthington Soccer League, the Worthington Police Department, several banks and other businesses and organizations from as far away as St. Paul. The Karen Community showed Worthington their culture by providing their traditional food, performing dances and displaying their traditional clothing. The *Worthington Daily Globe* reported on April 7, 2008, that hundreds of community members and 80 Karen attended, and that the idea for the event came from Jenny Andersen Martinez, the human resources director at JBS. The mayor of Worthington, who also attended the event, reported that the place was packed and that he personally sampled the Karen food. In addition to this event, which welcomed the Karen specifically, Worthington also hosts an annual international festival each summer which gives everyone in the community an opportunity to sample one another's culture through food, dance, and song.

A community leader in business described how she took a stand to make her workplace more welcoming and comfortable. When the Karen started to work at her place of business she was in a position to create innovative policies and practices. She has been so successful that her ideas have been replicated nationwide. One of her innovations was to hire a Karen

speaking community liaison who took care of non-work related needs of the Karen, such as finding housing, registering children at school, and accessing other services.

I think from the beginning it was about creating a really welcoming atmosphere. ... We built a really strong relationship with [the Karen]. ... We gave them extensive tours of not only the plant but the community. We wanted to show them everything that our community had to offer. Not just the plant. We wanted to emphasize to them that this is a whole package. We don't just hire someone for a job for eight hours. They've got to have a life outside the plant. I think they were impressed with us from day one--that we genuinely cared about what they would do outside the plant. We wanted to set up the different infrastructures for them to be able to prosper in the community...

Leadership

Community leaders in Worthington made conscious decisions to provide leadership in a variety of ways. Some modeled leadership by making a stand for diversity, others provided continuous “nudging,” and yet others lived as an example of welcoming behaviors. A Worthington faith community leader describes how he provided leadership for his congregation:

I don't know if this is so much a problem in larger places, but, I think that people have a tendency, American people have a tendency to develop a stigma toward a certain race of people and they have kind of a stand-offish type of attitude or approach to them and I think because of that because people are that way, I really believe that they are missing so much. When they're not willing to step up and say, you know, “I'm going to go that extra mile and I'm going to get to know these people.” They're missing out on so much. And I think part of that is fear. Americans are fearful of stepping up and really getting to know people from other cultures because of that fear factor. And I think if we could get all the [congregation members], the English speaking people up here, they would all say the same thing. They're a little bit like this at first. And I have just kept nudging them. And kind of nudging, and saying we have to recognize that these are God's people, that God has brought them here and the thing we need to do is just simply love them and just show the love of Christ to them. And as I have been doing that, little by little, more and more people [are] stepping up and now they're all saying the same thing--they absolutely love the Karen people.

Extraordinary Support and Encouragement

Several leaders reported feelings of exhaustion from trying to address the many needs of the newcomers. Many leaders interviewed spoke of the heroic work of other leaders, stating that they worked on call twenty-four hours per day, seven days each week, and that that is what it takes to help newcomers get settled. One leader reported that it was important to “never say no” and “never say wait.” A surprising finding was how incredibly humble the community leaders were. In a small community people know each other. Without exception, Worthington leaders preferred to give credit to other leaders than to take credit for themselves. It was in interviewing all the leaders that the extraordinary support and encouragement was revealed. For example, one community leader described a Worthington realtor’s commitment to the community, explaining that she uses her free time to go to the homes of her clients to be sure they know how to turn on the heat in the winter and how she works “on-call” whenever the Karen new homeowners need help or advice. Others leaders stated that despite foregoing any personal gain, she was committed to her Karen and refugee clientele. Another surprising finding was that although the questions asked of the leaders were focused on the Karen, all the community leaders spoke warmly of all people in Worthington, including other refugee groups.

Perceptions of the Karen in Worthington

Community leaders in Worthington attributed resettlement success to the characteristics of the Karen people themselves. Qualities that were considered helpful were the generosity of the Karen, how they honor community elders, their peaceful and loving nature, how loveable, hard-working, and compassionate they are and how they participate in

the larger community such as in the faith communities, group cleaning campaigns, visiting elders, and attending festivals. The Karen are collectivistic and highly organized. Once they became acclimated to Worthington, the Karen themselves assisted other newly arriving Karen. The organizational skills of the Karen are demonstrated in the success of the Karen Organization of Minnesota, in St. Paul, in becoming the first Karen organization in the United States to receive 501(c)3 nonprofit status.

Mutual Learning

One community leader said that he chose to live in Worthington because of the opportunity to live in a rural community that has diversity. Another had lived in Mexico City and was fluent in Spanish with a degree in international business and psychology. One of the things she enjoyed about her job was the opportunity to interact with people from all different cultures. Other leaders also reported that they enjoyed the diverse aspect of Worthington. A community member said that she got to know a Karen family by offering them rides. Her family has gotten to know the Karen family so well that they have become like her own family now.

Being around people with cultural differences helped both the Karen and Worthington people learn about one another's cultures. Just from "being around," understanding was developed. Another way that both communities learned about one another was from working together on activities such as a volunteer clean-up day or participation in the international festivals, faith community membership, employed work, or at school. That both communities spent time together seemed to be important, a finding supported by Allport and Pettigrew's research on social contact. A Worthington realtor reported that although she taught the Karen about housing related things, she learned much from the Karen, too. She took the opportunity

to observe what was important to them when choosing a home and realized she was learning about the values of the Karen:

I want to know well, why ...nobody looks at the garage. They go back there and look at the back yard and look to see if there is room for a garden. Is there sun for a garden? That's kind of how I look at some new listings now. Will this fit any of the clientele?... They have taught me so many things. ... I learned from them, *things* are not that important... This whole relational thing is the most important thing that ... they have. And then I discovered their love for their family is absolutely genuine and they are a community.

Impact on Worthington

In addition to the mutual learning that went on in Worthington, the Karen also had other impacts on the community. Since their arrival, the Karen have purchased 15-20 homes in Worthington. This is quite an accomplishment since multi-year work, credit and housing histories are required for home buying and the Karen have come so recently. Similarly in the school district, which is Worthington's second largest employer, the influx of Karen has kept enrollment from declining. Another impact was on the faith communities. In a small city where young people frequently leave town, according to one local faith community leader, their programs for children and adults have had an injection of vitality and in resources.

[The Karen are] very generous in their giving... They want to carry their fair share. So, they've been very helpful as far as the economics of the church. *They've been very, very helpful.* ...This community here really is kind of dying out because a lot of the younger families (the Caucasians) they're leaving the area. I believe [the Karen] bring a lot of economic stimulus to our area ..."

Limitations and Future Research

Predominately positive findings may have been obtained for a number of reasons:

1. *Minnesota Nice*
2. Social Desirability

3. Refugee Status

- a. Legal immigration status
- b. Empathy with political prosecution

4. Selective Sampling

Several reasons for predominately positive findings need to be carefully examined. The expression “Minnesota Nice” is often applied to Minnesotans who withhold their negative comments. Efforts to maintain social desirability are frequently found in social science research (Myrdal, 1944, 1969; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Positive findings might also have resulted from the Karen’s legal immigration status of “refugee” and empathy created by the recognition of the Karen’s escape from political oppression.

Negative comments from this study are found in the story of the faith community member who noticed that while some people maintained their membership in his faith community, they no longer attended worship services. He attributed this to possible clashes in worship styles. Interviews were conducted with people in Worthington, but people who left the community (the faith community or larger community) were not found for interviews. This selective sampling might have missed Worthington residents who were not enthusiastic about the newcomers and likewise Karen people who left town due to negative experiences in Worthington. Future research could interview people who were no longer in Worthington to determine the reasons why they left. Anecdotal information, however, tells us that the Karen who left Worthington did so for other reasons such as to pursue education, to reunite with family members, or to find higher paying jobs after having gained employment history in Worthington. Another negative finding was related to the exhaustion that community leaders

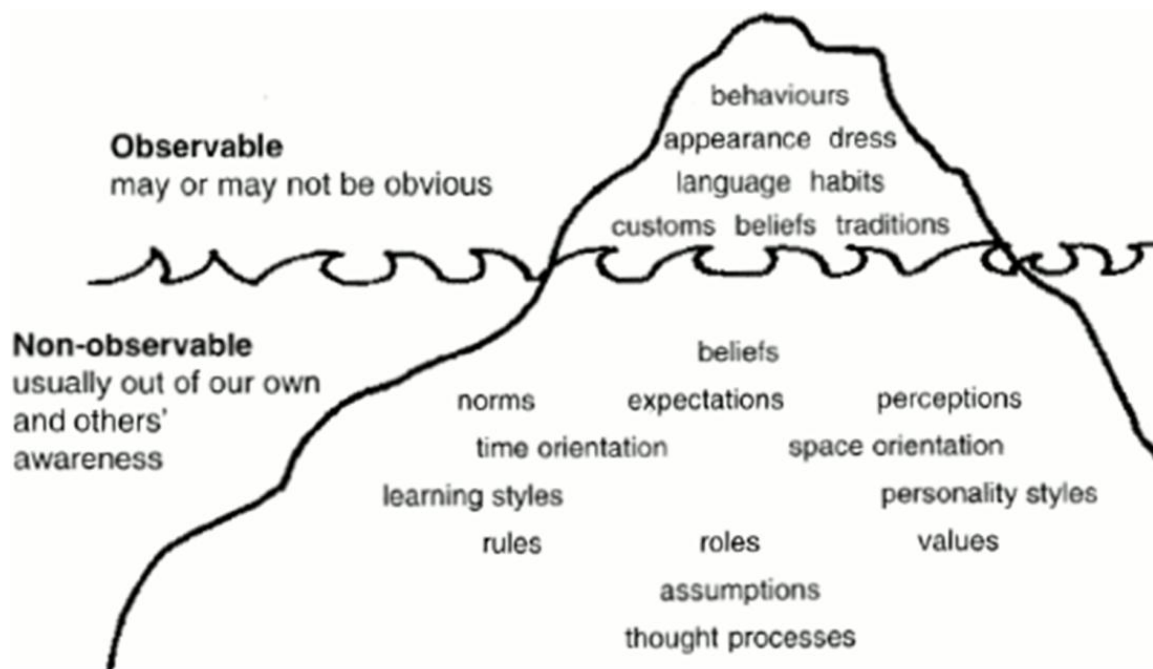
felt when trying to address the needs of the newcomers. Still other negative findings were not related to the Karen being in Worthington, but were about wages or working conditions in general which existed before the Karen arrived.

In addition to investigating reasons why people left Worthington, other future research could compare Worthington with other both successful and unsuccessful relocation cities or could explore why some people are more open to cultural experiences. Other limitations of this study were related to time constraints, travel fund availability, other funding constraints, and the sample size.

Suggestions for Consideration

This study and its companion study identify the characteristics in both the Karen and Worthington communities that led to resettlement success. A special characteristic shared by both communities was their willingness to interact and engage with one another. For 18 years, Worthington has held an annual international festival. Perhaps the success of that festival helped create positive feelings in the community towards people from other countries and cultures. The tradition of attending that festival may have helped foster the large attendance at the festival to welcome the Karen. These kinds of festivals introduce the communities to one another and create a familiarity with appearance, clothing, food and dance. This festive “shallow culture” event (focused on food, dance, and services) can lead to positive feelings in both communities about one another and a desire to understand one another at a deeper level. That the event has been so well attended demonstrates the willingness of both cultures to engage with one another. This kind of engagement or contact is consistent with Social Contact Theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 2008). Perhaps motivated by the positive feelings generated

during the event, the communities became open to “deep culture” experiences (focused on the values of each community). An example of a “deep culture” experience was described by the realtor as she got to know the housing preferences of the Karen and the great value they attached to family. Another example was the story told by one Karen man who said that he was learning Spanish in addition to English so that he could have more meaningful relationships with his neighbors.



http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/...l_learning/intercultural_competencies/developing_intercultural_understanding/diu_resources/resource_2_iceberg_model.html

3

Figure 6 Deep Culture/Shallow Culture Iceberg

In both communities the door was open to the other as demonstrated by the Karen couple approaching the faith community and the community’s response of welcoming the

³ Although the iceberg concept of culture is so widely used by interculturalists that it is frequently used without citation, it is generally attributed to the ideas of French & Bell (1995), Hall (1976), Selfridge & Sokolik (1975), and Weaver (1993).

Karen. Perhaps empathy was created by the memory of having one's own family member as the newcomer, such as in the example of the man whose mother was from Sweden. The shallow and deep cultural experiences of both communities led to a deeper understanding of one another and created a receptive environment for mutual learning to take place.

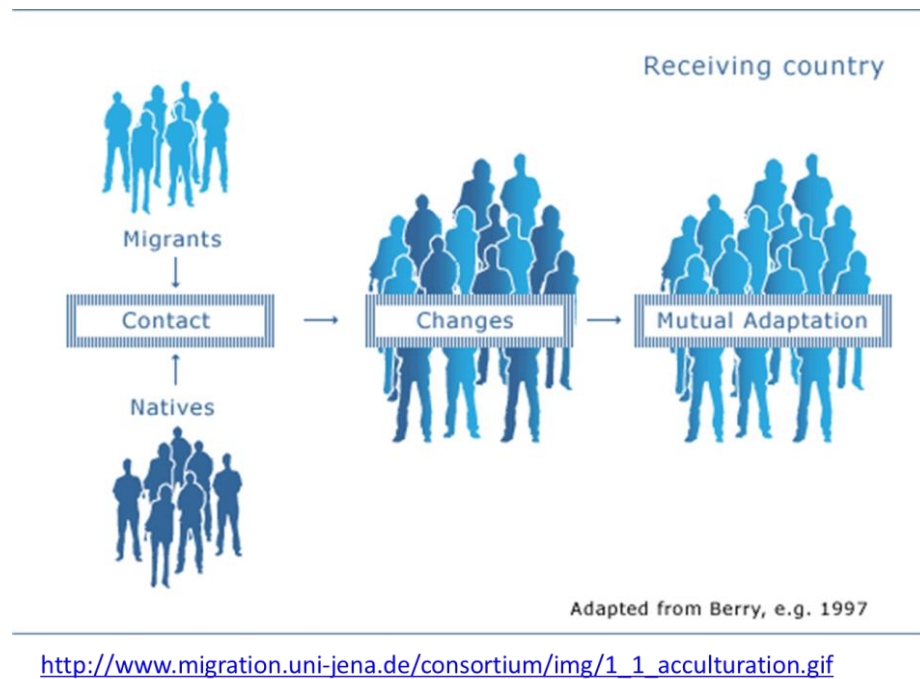


Figure 7 Mutual Adaptation

In future relocations to other rural towns, evaluation of the community's experience of diversity, openness to entertain other realities, and the determination and commitment to demonstrate mutual respect, can create a community of self-examination and willingness to accept behaviors and values that are different from one's own. In evaluating communities for future resettlement, it may be helpful to consider whether the future relocation community has these factors:

1. Previous positive experience or comfort with diversity,
2. Available infrastructure that supports newcomers,

3. Ethnorelative perspectives of community members,
4. Interest in other cultures and willingness to experience other values, and
5. Leaders willing to make an extraordinary commitment to success.

If these factors are present, there may be more likelihood of a successful resettlement experience. Leaders who model common values can provide a bridge that helps their followers adapt to new situations. The *mutual adaptation* of the Karen to Worthington and of Worthington to the Karen has played a crucial role in resettlement success and perhaps can provide a model for other cities. It is the hope of this study that the application of lessons learned from Worthington will help create smoother transitions as refugees settle in diverse rural and urban Minnesota communities.

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